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TEDxUND: An Escape Strategy For the War On Crime: Healing the Criminal

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David T. Link

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An Escape Strategy for the War on Crime: Healing the Criminal

Rev. David Link | TEDxUND
Mar 18, 2015

Video available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GHdBxBs9K0E>

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00:10
good afternoon I'm going to dedicate my
00:13
talk today to my surrogate father Ted
00:19
Hesburgh so and you all understand i
00:23
only have a few minutes to tell you
00:24
about my discoveries and to offer you a
00:29
challenge keep in mind that i was
00:32
originally trained as a trial lawyer so
00:35
it usually takes me a few minutes just
00:37
to clear my throat but but i am going to
00:42
make a very small message to you because
00:45
my message while very important and
00:49
while perhaps a key to societal peace is
00:55
a simple one to state we need to
01:00
redefine and we need to reformat the
01:05
missions of the criminal justice
01:09
programs in the united states from
01:12
punishment to healing now you've all got
01:20
to realize that for decades we have we
01:26
have conducted a what we call a war on
01:29
crime it's a it's an interesting war
01:34
we've tried everything we've tried to
01:36
lock them up throw away the keys we have
01:41
we've tried every possible method of
01:44
this profiling and we've even tried the
01:49

old philosophy of pirates which is the
01:56
beatings will continue until morale
01:59
improves but none of these techniques
02:02
that we have used in this so-called war
02:05
on crime have really worked the war goes
02:09
on we have more crime we have more
02:13
victims we have tremendous amounts of
02:15
our state and local budgets going into
02:18
Corrections work we have a ridiculous
02:24
number of people incarcerated and we
02:28
have a ridiculous rate of recidivism so
02:32
I I just want to talk to you about how
02:36
we handle all of that we we need to
02:40
think in terms of how that really works
02:44
you know before I got involved in prison
02:46
ministry I like most people thought that
02:51
all prisoners were alike that these were
02:53
bad people who were given to a life of
02:56
crime and to social deviance I believed
03:00
in things like harsher penalties throw
03:04
away the key oh I needed a wake-up call
03:16
I needed to make an attitude adjustment
03:19
about both prisons and prisoners first
03:24
of all all prisoners are not very much
03:26
alike they are individual human beings
03:30
who have individual problems that need
03:32
individual treatment treating them all
03:35
alike may be very convenient if you're
03:38
talking about warehousing but it's a
03:40
disaster if you're talking about
03:43
rehabilitation you know in the movie The
03:46

Green Mile the character played by Tom
03:50
Hanks says Percy you'd be better off if
03:54
you thought of this place as if it were
03:56
the critical care unit of a hospital and
04:02
of course Hanks had it right most of the
04:04
people in prisons I'll tell you are more
04:08
sick than they are bad people they have
04:13
a sickness which we call a social
04:15
illness but it's the kind of sickness
04:18
that we know how to treat and how to
04:22
cure prisoners come from terrible
04:25
backgrounds they have dysfunctional
04:29
families they have abuse they have
04:32
knucklehead friends they come from bad
04:35
neighborhoods the simple fact of the
04:38
matter is my friends that most people in
04:44
prison did not fall into the cracks they
04:47
were born in the cracks so we've got to
04:51
think about them as as people the the
04:59
important thing to do is to think about
05:03
their backgrounds not about our own
05:06
backgrounds in this i'm going to give
05:09
you an example of the kind of people
05:11
that are wasting away in our prisons the
05:16
i'm going to talk about the talent look
05:20
at that everything you see on that
05:22
screen the beautiful chessboard all
05:27
those intricate playing pieces
05:30
the rooks and the King and queens my
05:36
favorites of course the bishops the all
05:41
of this was handcrafted by a prisoner
05:47

using only popsicle sticks these hats
05:54
and scarves these were over 300 of these
06:00
were crocheted by maximum security
06:04
prisoners do not get a kind of and their
06:11
and their contributed by the way to the
06:13
caps for Kids program I got a big kick
06:18
out of these big dudes with all their
06:20
muscles and their tattoos they're
06:25
sitting around knitting for some
06:30
disadvantaged children that these
06:33
prisoners will never see now to tell you
06:37
about the kind of personalities at our
06:39
prisons I want to talk about my good
06:42
friend tommy tommy was when he came to
06:45
the prison the proverbial baddest man in
06:48
town tommy was two years old when his
06:50
dad split from the family by age six
06:56
Tommy carried a gun and a knife his
07:00
favorite pastime as a teenager was to
07:04
grab some stranger and beat the heck out
07:06
of him just to show that tommy was a
07:09
tough guy tommy was really devastated
07:17
when both his mother and his sister died
07:21
while he was in prison and he couldn't
07:23
go to the funerals he said if he could
07:27
have gotten out of his cell at that time
07:31
he had killed the first sob he could
07:33
come across now by the way they don't
07:37
abbreviate much in prisons these days so
07:39
I have cleaned that story up for you but
07:43
but the amazing thing that happened was
07:45

that one day a volunteer came to Tommy's

07:49

cell I started to talk about things like

07:53

God and spirituality and a

07:57

purpose-driven life and Tommy started to

08:01

turn his life around now Tommy had just

08:05

built a little model car beautiful

08:08

little car at a time when a gang war

08:12

broke out at that prison and the leader

08:14

of one of the gangs came to Tommy and

08:16

said tell me I want to buy that car and

08:18

tommy said ah it's not for sale and the

08:22

gang leader said a few curse words at

08:26

Tommy and stomped off but he came back

08:28

later in the day that gang leader and

08:32

said Tommy I really want that little

08:35

yellow Thunderbird I'll do anything and

08:38

tommy said oh you just changed your

08:41

offer before you said you'd buy the car

08:45

now you say you'll do anything here's

08:48

the deal it's got three parts miss any

08:50

part you don't get the car the first

08:53

thing I want you to do is stop the gang

08:57

war today don't wait till tomorrow

09:00

tomorrow's too late mate you can stop

09:03

the game wore today because you're one

09:04

of the leaders and all you got to do is

09:06

tell your boys but it's over and it'll

09:10

be over the second thing I want you to

09:13

do time he said is I want you to pray

09:16

for the members of that opposing gang

09:19

you know my friends it seems to me

09:22

that's right out of scripture isn't it
09:23
pray for your enemies and the third
09:27
thing Tommy said to the gang leader was
09:29
the third thing I want you to do is I
09:31
want you to come to church services with
09:33
me every Sunday so you can learn more
09:38
about this dude that everybody calls
09:41
Jesus now you may think that that that's
09:48
strange but I'm happy to tell you all to
09:52
the gang leader did all three Tommy gave
09:55
him the car
09:56
that proverbial baddest man in town had
10:00
changed the lives of hundreds of people
10:03
in that prison now you may think that
10:05
Tommy is unique no Tommy's not unique he
10:13
is a really great man but there are
10:17
plenty of people like Tommy in our
10:19
prisons this statement here was not
10:22
written by some famous theologian or by
10:26
a noted philosopher this was written by
10:31
a prisoner who has already changed his
10:34
life around but he continues to waste
10:39
away in our prison system a noted
10:46
national author more posts and I gress
10:49
has written a book about my transition
10:53
from university president to prison
10:57
chaplain it's a story that one of our
11:01
alumni has designated as going from
11:05
success to significance when I got into
11:11
the the whole prison ministry the name
11:14
of the book is as you can see camerata I
11:17

give you my hand that title comes from
11:23
the first line of the last verse of Walt
11:26
Whitman's famous song of the open road
11:29
now I'm not going to ask you to read a
11:32
lot of Walt Whitman many people would
11:33
consider that to be cruel and unusual
11:36
but but I do want you to think about
11:39
that last verse because therein lies the
11:43
challenge what if we stuck by each other
11:47
as long as we live no matter what our
11:52
brothers and sisters have done in the
11:54
immature parts of their lives what if we
11:57
stuck with them what if young people
11:59
started to say hey I'm not going to stop
12:02
with success I'm going for significance
12:05
and there is significance by the way in
12:09
dealing with our
12:10
brothers and sisters who society regards
12:14
as the least and the last but who we
12:19
know of has simply the lost and the
12:22
lonely what if we would start Colorado
12:27
cores on every college campus in every
12:32
city and village throughout the United
12:34
States what if we just stood up and
12:40
shouted I'm damn mad and I'm not going
12:43
to take it anymore I'm not going to let
12:46
my tax money go into a system it's not
12:50
only not working but it's doing a lot of
12:52
harm but i will say as part of this
12:56
challenge that if we're going to use
12:58
this heal the criminal method in trying
13:05

to get an exit from the war on crime

13:08

going to take a lot of work it won't

13:12

come from just wishing it it's going to

13:15

take a lot of people who have what we

13:18

refer to as active compassion and i'm

13:25

going to end with the last part of the

13:27

challenge it's a statement made by a

13:30

maximum security prisoner who tells us

13:33

all reminds us all that active

13:36

compassion is god's language everything

13:43

else is just talk thank you